

First El Paso County Courthouse
San Elizario, Texas

HABS No. Tex-3107

HABS
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71-CANEL
2 -

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Texas-3

Historic American Buildings Survey
Bartlett Cocke, District Officer
615 Maverick Bldg., San Antonio, Texas

HABS
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Page 1.

FIRST EL PASO COUNTY COURT HOUSE
San Elizario, El Paso County, Texas.

Present Owner: El Paso County School Board, El Paso, Texas.

Date of Erection: Prior to 1860

Architect: Unknown

Builder: Unknown

Present Condition: Fair

Number of Stories: One

Materials of Construction: Adobe, plaster and cypress.

Other Existing Records: None

Additional Data:

This building, which is now being used as a school, was the first Court House Building of El Paso County. It also served as a community gathering and meeting place. It is located on the south side of a one-block-square park in the center of the town of San Elizario.

The building is definitely Mexican in design. It is built of adobe, has a flat roof, and the plan includes a recessed porch, the floor of which is dirt. The porch is roofed and supported on wood columns forming ten bays. Porch faces north onto the public square.

Author: *Bartlett Cooke*
Bartlett Cooke, Dist. Officer

Date: October 18, 1936.

ADDITION
FOLLOWS...

W 8/28/37

Gregorio Garcia House (Los Portales)
North side of San Elizario Street
San Elizario
El Paso County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3107

Addendum to

Los Portales (First El Paso County Courthouse)
San Elizario
El Paso County
Texas
in HABS Texas Catalog (1974)

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PHOTOGRAPHS
HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Architectural and Engineering Record
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. TX-3107

GREGORIO GARCIA HOUSE (Los Portales)

An addendum to
Los Portales (First El Paso County Courthouse)
San Elizario
El Paso County
Texas
in HABS Texas Catalog (1974)

Location:

The Garcia House sits upon approximately one quarter acre lot on the north side of San Elizario Street, San Elizario, El Paso County, Texas. The town block is located between Alarcon Road (White Street) and Church Street. The front facade has a northeast orientation and faces the public plaza.

USGS San Elizario, Texas Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
13.379230, 3494970.

Present Owner:

El Paso Landmarks, Inc., a Texas non-profit organization.

Present Use:

The building is rented out as a sub-station by the El Paso County Sheriff's Office, the San Elizario Tax Office, and the San Elizario School District for a pre-kindergarten class which meets September through May.

Significance:

It is an example of adobe, Mexican-American, rural vernacular architecture. It is unique due to its large size and U-shape layout, with front inset porch. There are no other known surviving buildings of this floor plan in the El Paso area.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: The exact date of construction is unknown, however, present evidence places Los Portales c.1855. Local beliefs claim that it was built by Gregorio Nacenseno Garcia (1817-1896), a native of San Elizario, as a private residence (Alarcon, Garcia, and Skaggs interviews).
2. Architect: Not known.

3. Original and Subsequent Owners: The original owner is believed to have been Gregorio Garcia and at some point in the 1870's, he donated Los Portales to the town of San Elizario for use as a school building. It continued to be owned by the school district until 1965, when it was sold to El Paso Landmarks, Inc.
4. Alterations and additions: The building seems to be fairly intact with a limited number of changes. About 1967, the El Paso architectural firm of Carroll, DuSang, and Rand was employed to rehabilitate it. At this time, Los Portales was restuccoed with cement, the roof was restored, and the present red clay tile floor was laid (Carroll interview). Before this, it had a cement and dirt floor and the porch posts were of a more simple hewn style. (Washington interview). Some years after this work, an extension for bathrooms was added in the middle rear of the structure (Carroll interview).

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The Garcia House is reputed to have served as a court house. However, at this time, there is no documentary proof to support this belief.

It is certain, however, that the structure was used as an elementary school until 1922 (El Paso Herald). Octaviano Larrazolo is recorded as having taught school in San Elizario from 1878 to 1884. He later became Governor of New Mexico (1919-21) and United States Senator (1928-29, Bio. Dictionary of Governors of the U.S.). Claims that he was first teacher of the school district and held classes in Los Portales (Alacon Interview), putting the establishment of the school at about 1878, have no factual evidence.

At some time after 1922, Los Portales was converted into apartments and remained so until its purchase by El Paso Landmarks, in 1965.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Early photos are rare; a 1900's photograph in the El Paso Public Library's Southwest Collection has been misplaced. Two HABS photographs were taken in 1936. The building was photographed by HABS in summer 1980.
2. Bibliography:
 - a. Primary and Unpublished Sources:

Alarcon, Lorenzo:

Telephone interviews to home on August 19, 1980. Great-grandson of Gregorio Garcia, superintendent of San Elizario School District, 1923-67, age 79, discussion of Los Portales.
Carroll, E. D.:

Telephone interview to office on August 18, 1980.
Discussion of changes by firm of Carroll, DuSang, and Rand on
Los Portales in 1967.

Deed Book. City/County Building, El Paso, Texas, book 98.

Deed Book. University of Texas at El Paso Special
Collections Division, Book B.

El Paso Herald. June 9, 1923.

Emory, William H.:

U.S. Commissioner, "Boundary Map between the United States
and Mexico," 1855.

Garcia, Steve:

Grandson of Gregorio Garcia. Telephone interview to El Paso
office on August 13, 1980. Discussion of Los Portales.

Gerald, Rex:

Archeologist at University of Texas at El Paso.

Interview at office, August 15, 1980. Discussion of Presidio
at San Elizario and Los Portales.

Henry, W. S.:

Letter from Headquarters at San Elizario, Texas to Lieutenant
McLaws at 9th Department Headquarters, Santa Fe, New Mexico,
February, 1850. Original copy at National Archives,
Washington, D.C.

Skaggs, Mrs. Samuel R.:

Niece of Gregorio Garcia. Telephone interview on August 14,
1980, to home in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Discussion of Los
Portales.

Timmons, W. H.:

Professor of History at the University of Texas at El Paso.
Interview at office on August 21, 1980. Discussion of
Presidio at San Elizario and Los Portales.

Washington, Robert:

Local Resident. Interview August 16, 1980, at HABS Field
Office. Discussion of Los Portales.

b. Secondary and Published Sources:

Gwin, Adelina Trevino. "A History of San Elizario, Texas."
Unpublished dissertation, University of Texas at El Paso
(Texas Western College, 1950).

Sobel, Robert and Ramo, John. Biographical Dictionary of
Governors of the United States, 1789-1978. Westport,
Conn.: Meckler Books, 1978.

D. Supplemental Material:

Footnotes:

1. Research for the Garcia House was done with great difficulty. Early photos are rare. There has been no known major research done on the building's history except for a few newspaper descriptions which were largely based on legend. The old deeds are of little use in locating the site, since property descriptions are based largely on physical landscape elements such as trees, houses, roads, irrigation ditches, and streets that existed more than 100 years ago. Ed Carroll (of the firm of Carroll, DuSang, and Rand) claims there were plans of the building drawn up during renovation in 1967, but have been lost. Therefore, it was necessary to base much of the research on personal interviews, sketchy deed references, and early maps.
2. It is believed that the Garcia House is located within the perimeters of the Old Spanish Presidio which approximately bounds on present-day Alarcon and Socorro Roads (North-South limits), and Main and San Elizario Streets (West - East limits), (Gerald Interview). Therefore, based on that view, the following conclusions are derived:
 - a. It seems unlikely that Los Portales was a building that was part of the Old Presidio because in 1850, a military officer, named Henry, describes the Fort as being a shambles: "I have no better site for the garrison than that of the Old Presidio at present occupied by my command. It is a square about 800 feet and belongs to the government. It is a perfect ruin from which I have been enabled to obtain shelter for the companies. The remaining portions of the old establishment are perfectly worthless."
 - b. It also seems unlikely it was built before 1851 since an American Garrison occupied the Old Fort from 1849-51 (Timmons Interview).
 - c. Garcia's home may have been built by 1854 because a deed book of the same year records Garcia selling W. L. Diffendoffer property adjoining his own, "formerly being a part of what was called the old Presidio running along the public street toward the interior of the Presidio in a southeastwardly direction forty varas to a stake adjoining the land of Gregorio Garcia. Hence along the land of Gregorio Garcia thirty varas." All research has failed to locate when or where Garcia obtained land inside the Presidio.
 - d. Lastly, the 1855 Emory Boundary Map shows small squares representing buildings along the insides of streets that are probably the edges of the Fort. Thus, showing there was building construction in the area of the Presidio, possibly one square representing Los Portales.

3. Some sources feel it was used as a school as early as 1872, but the most reliable date seems about 1878 when Octaviano Larrazolo took charge of the San Elizario School (see Historical Events). Lorenzo Alarcon recalls attending elementary school in Los Portales in 1907.
4. There was a County Court House located on the Plaza to the west of Garcia House which may have been confused in the minds of later residents. Also, Gregorio Garcia was a Justice of the Peace and a man of prominence in San Elizario, which would have made his home a likely spot for political gatherings, thus farther confusing the role of the house in local memories. Also, Lorenzo Alarcon, in his interview, feels the beliefs that the house was used as a courtroom are myths.
5. Larrazolo is not listed in any deed records of El Paso as owning any property until after 1884. Thus if he did teach in Los Portales, it is possible to speculate that part of his teaching contract may have included lodging in the building, which would have been convenient, due to its large size.

Prepared by:

Christopher S. Witmer
Architectural Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
August, 1980

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: Garcia House is an example of a more highly developed form of Mexican-American rural vernacular architecture of the El Paso area. Believed to have been built c.1850, form and layout are not without precedent. It bears a striking resemblance to the Spanish Governor's Palace of Santa Fe, New Mexico, built more than 200 years earlier.
2. Condition of Fabric: Overall the building is in sound shape and seems to be fairly well maintained.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The main length of the house is 119' 6" by 32' 10". It is one story high with no basement.
2. Foundations: None, adobe brick placed on ground.
3. Wall construction: Adobe brick wall with cement stucco painted white.
4. Structural system: Load bearing adobe walls, and round vigas in roof system.
5. Porches: One main inset porch, running most of the length of the front of building, with a single room at each end, being open on the northeast side only. The porch roof is supported by eleven, square, wood, chamfered posts, with decorative, cross-shaped brackets. All exposed wood is painted tan and there is a band of tan paint, about 2' high, running around the base of the wall of the porch.
6. Chimneys: None
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and Doors: There are four doors opening onto the porch area; two sets of double doors along the back of the porch and two single doors leading into each room at the ends of the porch. There are two doors at the rear of the main building, with one going into a bathroom extension. All exterior doors have flush wood panels, plain molding surrounds, a triangular wood pediments. All doors and moldings are painted tan.
 - b. Windows: All windows are wooden, six over six pane, double-hung sash. The porch windows have pediments over them; all others have plain lintels. All windows and moldings are painted tan.
8. Roof: Asbestos roll roofing over mud roof (Terrado). Metal pipe canales extend from the roof parapets.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans:
 - a. Cellar: None

- b. First floor: The building is long, linear, and one story high. The floor plan forms a flat "U" shape. The six main rooms are constructed in a shotgun (interconnecting) style, one room deep. There is a small wing on each end of the building which projects toward the front; each contains one room. The porch runs along the front of the building, between these two wings.
2. Flooring: Nearly the entire flooring of the building, including the porch, is made of red clay tiles, about 1' x 1'. The two rooms of the eastern end and the adjoining wing have linoleum tile.
3. Wall and Ceiling Finish: All walls are cement plaster, painted white. Both wings and the three western rooms have exposed vigas and latias. The three rooms of the eastern end have modern dry wal and drop ceilings, painted white.
4. Openings:
 - a. Doors and Doorways: All interior doors are wood panel with plain molding surrounds.
5. Hardware: All doorknobs, locks, and butt hinges are of recent origin.
6. Mechanical Equipment:
 - a. Heating, air conditioning: All heating is done by gas heaters. Cooling is by evaporative coolers.
 - b. Lighting: Electric and natural.
 - c. Plumbing: There is a water fountain and bathroom in the second room of the east end, and bathroom facilities in the small extension in the rear of the building.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house is located in a small, rural town of the lower El Paso Valley. The neighborhood is residential and the house overlooks the public plaza. It is situated across from San Elizario Church along San Elizario Street.

2. Outbuildings: None.

Prepared by:

Christopher S. Witmer
Architectural Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
August, 1980

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of the Garcia House in San Elizario, Texas, was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), National Architectural and Engineering Record (NAER), of the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS), in cooperation with the West Texas Council of Governments. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth L. Anderson, Principal architect, the documentation was conducted by Project Supervisor Paul D. Dolinsky (HABS Washington D.C. office); Project Historians Christine Saurel (Columbia University) and Christopher S. Witmer (The Pennsylvania State University); Architectural Foreman Dwight H. Burns (Texas Tech University); Architectural Technicians Ann Louise Barr (University of Arizona), Barry Lee Gill (North Dakota State University), Thomas M. Hocker (The Catholic University of America), and Sandra L. Sherrill (Auburn University); and Architectural Photographer David J. Kaminsky. This project was completed in the HABS field office in El Paso, Texas during the summer of 1980.

ADDENDUM TO
GREGORIO GARCIA HOUSE
(Los Portales)
(El Paso County Courthouse, First)
N. side of San Elizario St.
San Elizario
El Paso County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3107

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20001